

# Primary Source Digital Documents: CCSS & Complexity of Text

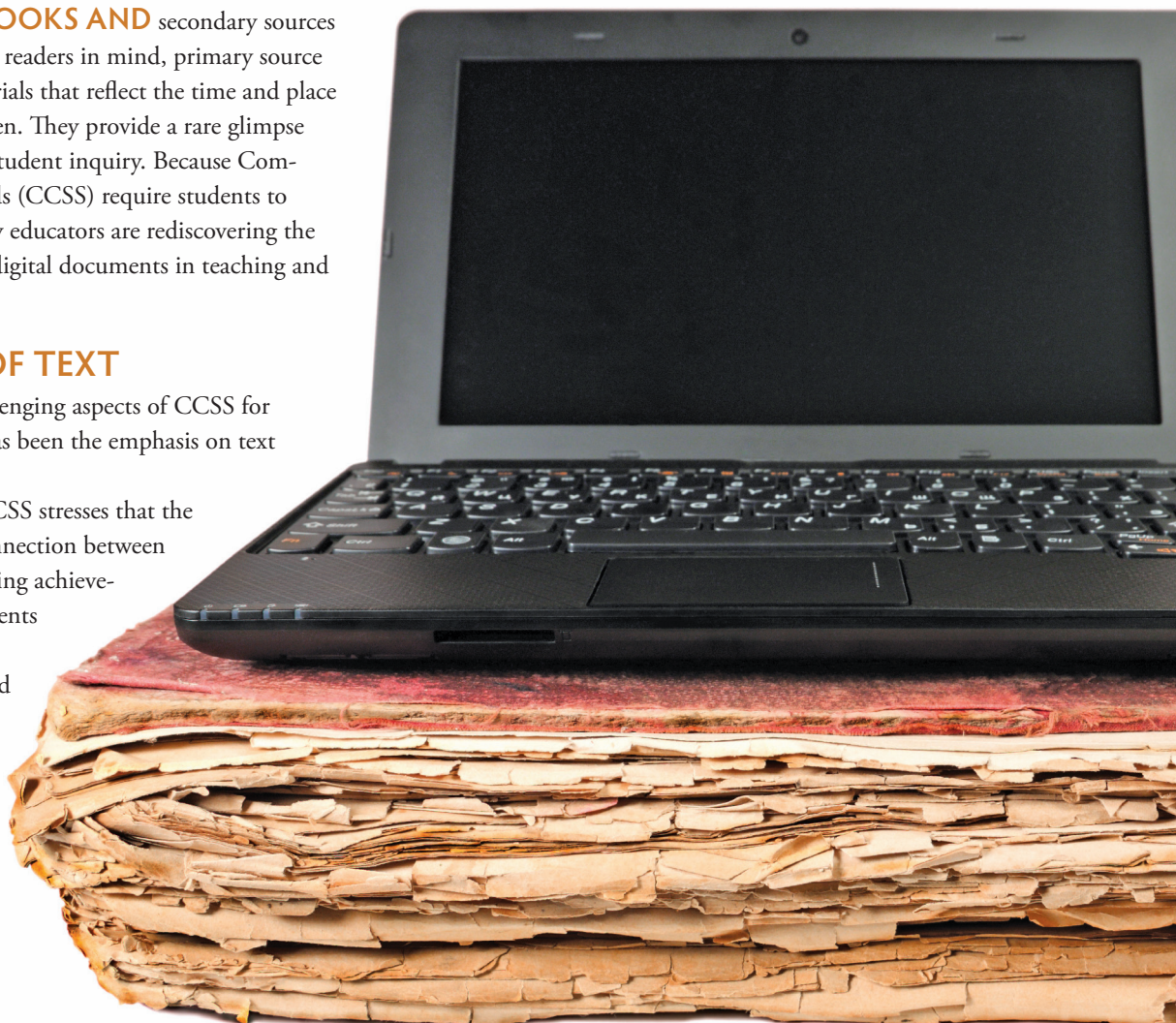
by ANNETTE LAMB

**U**NLIKE TEXTBOOKS AND secondary sources written with youth readers in mind, primary source documents are raw materials that reflect the time and place in which they were written. They provide a rare glimpse into the past and ignite student inquiry. Because Common Core State Standards (CCSS) require students to read complex texts, many educators are rediscovering the value of primary source digital documents in teaching and learning.

## COMPLEXITY OF TEXT

One of the most challenging aspects of CCSS for teachers and librarians has been the emphasis on text complexity.

Appendix A of the CCSS stresses that the research supports the connection between text complexity and reading achievement (2012). Those students who are able to read and comprehend sophisticated materials independently are most successful. From letters and diaries to legal documents, primary sources are excellent examples of challenging reading materials for students.



The CCSS approach is intended to provide challenging texts that will stretch and engage students. Reading Standard 10 identifies three measures of text complexity: qualitative measures, quantitative measures, and matching reader to text and task. Each of these measures can be connected to using primary source digital documents with youth.

## QUALITATIVE MEASURES

Qualitative evaluation of the text is based on features such as levels of meaning, document structure, language conventions, and knowledge demands. Works with a single meaning are easier for students to understand than those with multiple levels of meaning.

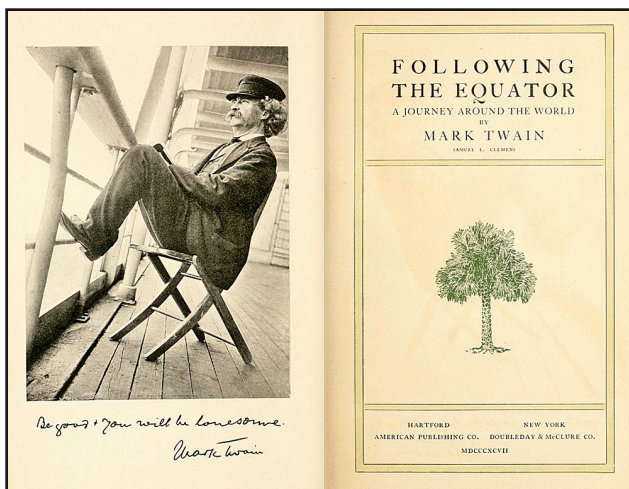
### LEVELS OF MEANING

Satire, irony, parody, and farce found in historical essays can be particularly difficult for learners. However, they provide an excellent opportunity for youth to separate the author's literal message from the underlying meaning.

Mark Twain, who is known for finding humor in everyday situations, often used irony and sarcasm in his work. Ask students to select a passage by Twain and share the levels of meaning associated with his balance of humor with serious issues. For instance, the website Archive.org contains many of the works of Mark Twain such as *Following the Equator: A Journey around the World* published in 1897. In this nonfiction travelogue, Twain criticizes imperialism, missionary zeal, and racism, but supports the women's suffrage movement and respect for all religions. See Figure 1, below.

Satire is often used in politically charged settings. It can be used to put people involved in a particular movement in a bad light or convey information in a condescending way. It may not be nice, but it can be very effective. The broadside *A Deal You Can't Afford to Miss*, published in 1968, is an excellent example. Opponents to the Poor People's march on Washington circulated a broadside intended to ridicule the movement. The authors of the broadside used satire as

Fig. 1. *Following the Equator* by Mark Twain (Archive.org)



a mean of showing their views on the march. The work is short and easy to read making it an effective work to discuss satire with youth who may not read at grade level.

## AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

While the purpose of a text is explicitly stated in some informational texts, complex texts may contain hidden or subtly stated purposes. Identification of the author's purpose is at the core of understanding a historical primary source. Persuasive letters, personal accounts, and diary entries are all written for different reasons. Youth can easily miss the main idea of the work if they don't understand the author's intentions.

Not all students are drawn to primary source documents. They also may not have the prior knowledge needed to comprehend complex documents. Background information can be provided so that students are able to handle the complex historical documents. The award-winning nonfiction work, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson, is for adults, but works well in the high school classroom. A wealth of primary sources, including letters and newspaper articles, could be used to help teens understand the immigrants who moved to Chicago from across the South. According to Meg Steele, guest blogger on Teaching with the Library of Congress (blog) on February 12, 2013, example materials can be found at the Library of Congress.

## STRUCTURE

Sophisticated informational texts often contain conventions of a specific discipline. The graphics in these texts may require interpretation to understand the text. For instance, the U.S. Patents source often contains scientific information and complex diagrams. Google Patents can be used to search for flight patents. Involve students in discussing the science behind the patents for flying machines. See Figure 2, page 7.

## LANGUAGE CONVENTIONALITY AND CLARITY

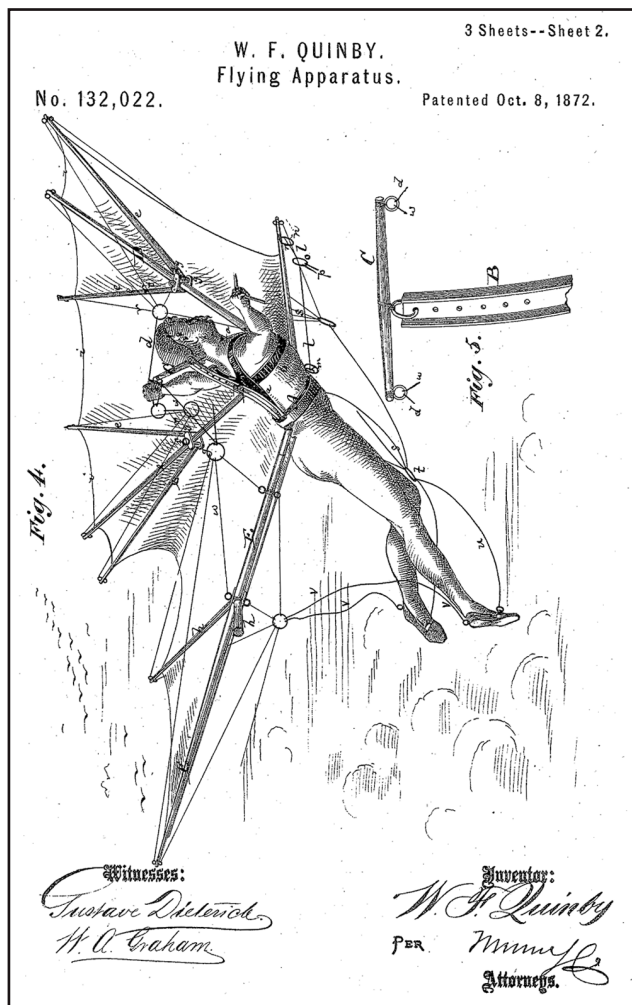
The text may include archaic language and ambiguities, particularly in the case of historical documents. The archaic language and typography of primary texts can increase the complexity. For instance, *Run Away from the Subscriber* (1769) is an advertisement placed by Thomas Jefferson. In the 18th century, the letter "s" sometimes looked like a lower case "f". See Figure 3, page 7. The Geography of Slavery in Virginia website contains hundreds of advertisements to analyze.

## KNOWLEDGE DEMANDS

Complex texts may require an in-depth knowledge of a particular culture or discipline. They may also rely on the fact that readers have extensive life experiences or knowledge of current events. The works may also contain multiple



Fig. 2. Flying Machine patent from Google Patents



perspectives or views difficult for a student to understand. More difficult texts often contain multiple references to other texts. These elements can make primary sources a difficult but important part of a reader's experience. The U.S. National Library of Medicine's History of Medicine collection contains fascinating documents on a wide range of topics related to medicine. For instance, students can compare monographs written in the 19th century with what is known about cholera pandemics today.

## QUANTITATIVE MEASURES

Quantitative evaluations of the text are based on features such as readability measures. Adam Jarowt and Katsumi Tanaka analyzed two databases of digitized historical documents written during the 18th through early 20th centuries (2012). They found that earlier texts are more difficult to read than more recent texts based on popular readability measures.

Various tools can be used to measure the readability of texts. However, it can be difficult to apply these measures to historical documents for a variety of reasons. First, the digital document may not have been scanned in a form that can be

Fig. 3. Run Away advertisement in *The Virginia Gazette*

**R**UN away from the subscriber in Albemarle, a Mulatto slave called *Sandy*, about 35 years of age, his stature is rather low, inclining to corpulence, and his complexion light; he is a shoemaker by trade, in which he uses his left hand principally, can do coarse carpenters work, and is something of a horse jockey; he is greatly addicted to drink, and when drunk is insolent and disorderly, in his conversation he swears much, and in his behaviour is artful and knavish. He took with him a white horse, much scarred with traces, of which it is expected he will endeavour to dispose; he also carried his shoemakers tools, and will probably endeavour to get employment that way. Whoever conveys the said slave to me, in Albemarle, shall have 40 s. reward, if taken up within the county, 4 l. if elsewhere within the colony, and 10 l. if in any other colony, from  
**THOMAS JEFFERSON.**

easily read by these tools. Second, the document may use archaic language and structure making it difficult to apply the formulas to historical documents. Finally, some documents may have readability issues that go beyond the text on the page such as the quality of the scanned image itself.

Katie Jones, Justin M. Thibault, and Ray Wolpaw studied ten Holocaust historical source documents commonly used with tenth grade students (2000). They concluded that the readability scores of these materials were far above the intended audience. They suggested the use of scaffolds such as vocabulary lists, highlighting passages, and reading guides. However, the standards indicate that these scaffolds should be eliminated when possible.

## READER AND TASK CONSIDERATIONS

Matching the reader to the text and task involves reader variables such as motivation and task variables like the sophistication of the activity.

### MOTIVATION

Primary source documents present unique difficulties for some young readers. In some cases, easier texts may be needed to allow for deeper understanding. On the other hand, students may be successful with more difficult texts if the content is interesting.

Many students are interested in nature and the environment. These topics can be connected with history to increase motivation. Provide students with a menu of options based on their time period of interest such as the Yosemite Act (1864), Antiquities Act (1906), Wilderness Act (1964), Clean Air Act of 1970 (1970), and Archaeological Resources Protection Act (1979).

Too much pressure on students when dealing with difficult works can easily turn off readers. The key to success is motivation. The CCSS use independent reading choices as the carrot to entice readers. Guided practice in close reading can then be used to build good reading habits.

Fig. 4. OurDocuments.gov



## CHOICE

Choice can be motivating for some students. Rather than everyone reading the same document, allow youth to choose among four documents such as the Northwest Ordinance (1787), the Homestead Act (1862), the Pacific Railway Act (1862), and the Morrill Act (1862). After getting to know one document, ask students to work in small groups looking for connections among the documents and how they reflect a larger issue such as the federal government's role in settling the West. These four primary sources, along with other milestone documents, can be found at the website OurDocuments.gov/. See Figure 4, above.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL LIBRARIANS

Classroom teachers and school librarians can work together to identify and organize digital documents for student use.

Many of the CCSS require that students are able to make comparisons among texts and build arguments using information from multiple texts. This demands that librarians assist teachers in identifying sets of texts related to a particular topic. For instance, learners might compare the Indian policy reform solutions advocated by President Chester Arthur in his 1881 First Annual Message to Congress, The Dawes Act (1887), and Helen Hunt Jackson in her book *A Century of Dishonor* (1888). This activity provides students with the opportunity to work with different types of historical documents.

Look for ways to bridge primary source documents with more familiar works such as historical fiction. Connect *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens with information from The Proceedings of Old Bailey website. This website provides

transcriptions of the criminal courts in London from 1674 to 1913. Involve students in reading court cases about children like those found in *Oliver Twist*.

Domain-specific reading skills are necessary for success with historical documents. Students must understand the time period, social context, location, and people connected with the document. In addition to dealing with archaic language and cultural differences, young people must also have an understanding of the discipline such as scientific writing or political writing. All of these issues make historical texts more complex than many other types of reading and well-suited for addressing the CCSS.

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